

Dress Reformers and Their Fight for Equality – 19th century heroines

Imagine a time when women and girls were forced to dress a certain way. There were no laws that said that this was necessary, but it was an accepted tradition in America that girls and women had to use specific clothing.

Most of these clothes consisted of layers of heavy materials, dresses that went down to the ankles and long sleeves that went to the wrists. These clothes were worn all year long, with some differences made for the weather. No matter what time of year it was, women's clothing was always difficult to work in.

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THEN & NOW: HOW WOULD YOU DRESS FOR THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES

[Cooking over an open fire](#)

[Carrying heavy loads up and down stairs](#)

[Working around machinery](#)

[Working in a field or garden](#)

Now click on the links above for pictures of how women may have dressed in the 1840s and 50's. How could the clothing these women wore be unhealthy and dangerous? (Also think of the mud and snow!)

In the 1850s, a movement began in New York and other northern states called Dress Reform. This was a movement started by women to change the way they dressed, to make them feel healthier and safer. Many women began to experiment with new ways of dressing. This included the famous Bloomer Outfit, invented by [Elizabeth Smith Miller](#) and made popular by [Amelia Bloomer](#). Click [HERE](#) to see images of the "Bloomer" outfit designed by Elizabeth Smith Miller and made famous by Amelia Bloomer.

As soon as these new dresses were worn on the streets of small towns and big cities, the women who wore them began to be ridiculed. Eventually women stopped wearing the outfits. They wanted to focus on even more important issues, such as winning the right to own property and vote.

Class Discussion:

How are people who act or dress differently treated today? Are there some places where it may be more difficult to be seen as “different”? Are there times when you or someone you know has been made fun of for the way you or they look or dress?

